

IT WAS a time when male broadcasters came to work after being thrashed by their wives because pretty, 20-somethings fell in love with their voice and sent them love letters. It was a time when scripts of a more serious nature were neatly written on bulky fullscape and when manuscripts were sometimes lost to foraging cows... These and many more nuggets are the stories that All India Radio (AIR) will *not* broadcast but that old-timers still remember with amazing alacrity. It is also the stuff that the radio station, which has a formidable network of 208 broadcasting centres today, was built on after radio made its debut to India in Mumbai in 1927.

On the eve of the government-owned radio station's platinum jubilee on Tuesday, retired employees tune into a time when the airwaves had only just begun to crackle with excitement. They say it was the best time of their lives.

Meenalben Dixit, a resident of Santacruz (W) is 71 today. Only too happy to remember the "good old days", Dixit says she had joined AIR in 1959 as a programme director for the twice-a-week Gujarati programme *Mahila Mandal*. "Running a 50-minute programme live in those days was not easy. We used to have 25-30 fullscape pages in our hand. But that was what gave us a thrill *kyunki gadbad hone ke chances zyada hote the*."

Dixit, who retired after 31 years of service, remembers a friend and colleague, M B Gaikwad, who retired as station director in Mumbai. "After Goa was liberated from the Portuguese in 1961, the government wanted news broadcasts to start from there immediately. So Gaikwad was sent to Goa. Since there was no recording studio there, they worked in a makeshift

Ride the AIR-waves back to w



IN SYNC: Dhirubhai Dani, Jaywantiben Kaji, Meenalben Dixit and Ameen Sayani

They did it all at a time when the medium was still nascent. On the platinum jubilee of All India Radio, old-timers tell VIDYA how decades ago, the airwaves crackled with the sound of excitement and discovery

area. When Gaikwad took a tea break in the middle of a news programme, he returned to find that a cow had swallowed half the manuscript he was to read out. He pulled some pieces out of her mouth and tried to complete the news presentation," reminisces Dixit, still laughing heartily as though recounting the story for the first time.

Many retired employees, who lent their voice to compere programmes, relive the thrill of charming listeners with their voice. The more besotted fans even turned up at the AIR station looking for the object of their obsession. Like there was this handsome chap in his 20s who travelled all the way from Virar to profess his love to a woman compere. When he arrived at the studio, he simply couldn't believe that a

woman of 45 and with buck teeth could have such a melodious voice! Then there was this male announcer who received a love letter at home from a young woman who had fallen in love with his voice. It seems the poor man came to work the next day, battered by his wife.

Jaywantiben Kaji worked for AIR for 22 years as a producer for children's and women's programmes. She remembers the time when AIR rained on her parade. "It was Diwali night on November 15, 1982, and I threw a party at my residence when I suddenly heard that the programmes had been changed. "Vinoba Bhavne had just died. So I rushed to the AIR building and went to the library and desperately looked through the books and other literature. Finally,

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The old Radio Bhavan at Ballard Estate

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we came upon biographies of Vinobaji and we aired them the entire night."

Naturally, decades ago, there were many production and transmission goof-ups and Kaji says there is one line firmly etched in her memory. Echoing the past, she reels it off: '*Yantrik kharabiyon ki vajah se aap ye programme nahin sun paye. Uske liye hum mafi chahate hain.*' (Due to technical difficulties, this programme cannot be broadcast. We apologise for the inconve-

nience). These were all a part of our thrilling work at AIR," she reminisces.

Of course, Kaji's was a time when radio had an ardent following and was a powerful medium that reached out to the masses in seconds. "I think it was during the Indo-China War that I was monitoring the transmission one night, when our announcer requested the people to switch off their lights because of a possible air raid. There was an immediate blackout in the Colaba region. Such was the power of radio," Kaji recalls.

Ameen Sayani of *Geet Mala* fame remembers his career at AIR, which lasted more than four decades. "I had been with AIR as an English broadcaster since I was eight. But all through college, I had this feeling that I should broadcast in Hindi as well. But AIR rejected me during the screen test. Then I started with Hindi at Radio Cylon, where I did a lot of *halla gulla* and made a lot of *shor sharaba*. After a long time, in the 1970s, AIR took me on as a broadcaster in Hindi. That was my greatest day. It was like coming back home."

For 85-year-old Dhirubhai Dani, who began work at AIR as a staff artist in 1941, being part of this illustrious institution was nothing less than inspiring. Says Dani, who is still remembered for his children's programme *Bahurupi* and who retired as senior broadcaster and producer after 37 years with AIR: "I have fond memories of all the stalwarts whose formative years were spent at AIR, coming to our studios to record. Also, there were two people, C C Mehta and Z A Bukhari, seniormost people at the station, who used to scour the streets to get the genuine reaction of various people. You cannot find such dedication to work today." Touche!